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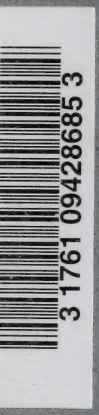
Modern Germany and the Modern World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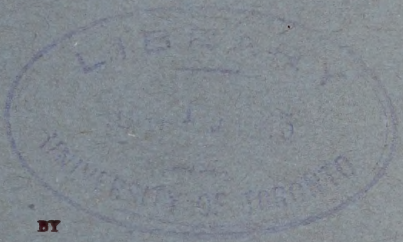

BY

M. E. SADLER

VICE-CHANCELLOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS; HONORARY STUDENT OF CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD

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MODERN GERMANY AND THE MODERN WORLD

THE Committee of the Victoria League have asked me to write a short account of the place of Modern Germany in the Modern World, explaining how, in spite of the intellectual and other services which Germany has rendered to our present-day civilisation, her national policy has yet been poisoned by sinister and selfish aims. That policy has during recent years been a growing menace to the peace of Europe. It is now the open and desperate enemy of some ideas and principles which we of the British Empire hold dearer than life itself. Those who are responsible for German policy have thought it well to force on a life and death struggle between their ideals and ours. Like gamblers, they have staked all on the cast. They hoped, perhaps, that at this juncture we should stand aside. In that case they, the men responsible for German policy, planned first to crush France so mercilessly that she could never stand in their path again : next, to beat back the Russian invasion, and then patch up a peace with the Slavs : and finally to concentrate their stupendous power in an attack on the British Empire, bent upon breaking us and (by diplomatic pressure if possible, or, failing that, by force) lowering us into a state of vassalage to Berlin. But they miscalculated. Their reading of our character was wrong. They underrated our national spirit. They exaggerated the depth of our party divisions.

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They misjudged the temper of the self-governing Dominions overseas. They did not divine the strength of Indian loyalty. They had attached too much importance to the influence of their intrigues in America. And therefore they find themselves, committed to a perilous and speculative adventure, hot with ambitions for a tyrannous power over half the world, armed with an almost unimaginable strength upon the continent of Europe, pledged like pirates to ruthlessness, but confronted by the armies and navies of three great Powers, by the granite of British determination and by the moral disapproval of the greater part of the civilised world.

The pity of it is that the authors of this policy of unscrupulous brigandage have, for the time, behind them the united support of a great and highly educated nation, of a nation which has done illustrious service to philosophy, to literature, to music, and to science, as well as to industry and the management of modern city-life. We are engaged against a whole people, disciplined like no other European people; convinced (though, I think, mistakenly convinced) of their own superiority in the affairs of the mind; obedient to the orders of their State; proud, inordinately proud, of their national achievements and of what they deem to be their historic mission in the world; and bound to us by countless ties of personal friendship and affection, and by the obligation which for more than a century British thought has been incurring to German, as German thought to our own. This is the cruel paradox. Two nations, each of which was eagerly and fruitfully learning from the other, and never so eagerly or fruitfully as during the last ten years, are now pitted against one another in a violent struggle which overwhelms all hope of compromise. And some of the very men—like Harnack, Eucken and

Rein—to whom English scholars are most intimately known, have declared themselves our enemies, without any sign of misgiving at the principles which are involved in the national policy of their rulers. Let us therefore, in these first weeks of murderous war, endeavour to disentangle what is good from what is evil in the German character and national purpose. Let us remind ourselves of the debt of the modern world to German patience, discipline, organisation, and ideas. While the first act of the tragedy is still unfinished, let us keep in mind what is noble and inspiring in German character and in German achievement, so that, when the day of reckoning comes, we may be prepared to help our Government, and those with whom our Government will act, in so planning for the future that German science and idealism, now perverted for the purpose of relentless and selfish war, may be used in that rebuilding of European civilisation which will be the task of the Great Peace.

II

In order to understand the policy and achievements of a nation, we must study (so far as a foreigner may) its ways of thinking and the inner failings, as well as the virtues, of its character. But this is a difficult task. We know how shallow a judgment many foreign observers pass upon the English character. We should be on our guard, therefore, against misjudgment and miscalculation, when we try to analyse the mental habits and the moral characteristics of the Germans. They, like ourselves, are manifold in origin and in social tradition. They, like all modern peoples, have a complex psychology. And those among us who have been most

intimate with certain sides of German life are in danger of over-estimating our knowledge. The inner secrets of national character are rarely disclosed. And, when at some great crisis they are in part laid bare, we need to remind ourselves that under nervous shock or intense nervous excitement (and the Germans are a nervous people) it sometimes happens (as at Louvain recently) that apparently well-established habits and principles are for the time inhibited and overthrown.

Therefore, in describing the defects of the German mind and character, I will base my remarks as far as possible upon observations made by responsible and experienced Germans to a German audience. Prince Bernhard von Bülow, an ex-Chancellor of the German Empire, has a good deal to say in his *Imperial Germany* about the German weakness in political judgment.[1] "Despite the abundance of merits and great qualities with which the German nation is endowed, political talent has been denied to it .... We are not a political people .... Not that we ever lacked penetration and understanding for the sequence of political things . . . but what we did lack, and what we still often lack, is the art of proceeding from insight to practical application, and the greater art of doing the right thing politically, by a sure creative instinct." "Politically there is an obvious disproportion between our knowledge and our power .... There is too often a lack of the political discernments which can grasp the bearing of acquired knowledge . . . ." He tells a story of a conversation which he had with an experienced high Prussian official, the late Dr. Althoff. The latter said to Prince von Bülow, "We Germans are the most learned nation in the world and the best soldiers

[1] English translation published (1914) by Cassell, pp. 107–120, 129–30, 187, 206.

We have achieved great things in all the sciences and arts : the greatest philosophers, the greatest poets and musicians, are Germans. Of late we have occupied the foremost place in the natural sciences and in almost all technical spheres, and, in addition to that, have accomplished a great industrial development." But, he added, we cannot be everything. There must be some weak point. What is that? "We are political donkeys." Perhaps in a few years' time, when the Germans look back on this war and on the ingenious calculations of self-interest which disposed them to allow their rulers to make it inevitable, they will recall Prince von Bülow's talk with the shrewd Dr. Althoff.

Another remark of Prince von Bülow is, in fact, a charge that the German mind is weak in observing facts, especially unwelcome facts which do not fit into a preconceived or cherished theory. "We Germans," he remarks, "are, on the one hand, a sentimental, tender-hearted people and are prone always, perhaps too much so, to follow the dictates of our heart against our better judgment. But, on the other hand, our passion for logic amounts to fanaticism, and whenever an intellectual formula or a system has been found for anything, we insist with obstinate perseverance on fitting realities into the system." Those of us who, in these days of appalling conflict with the German army, remember the open-hearted affection of our German friends and the cordial intimacies of their family life, may do well to remember Prince von Bülow's analysis of the two sides of the German mind—its sentimental tenderness and its grotesque subservience to fashionable theorisings. People who are naturally tender-hearted may steel themselves into inhumanity at the dictates of a theory. People who pride themselves on their freedom of thought may be prone to intellectual credulity when a doctrine

has received high academic or social authority. This may explain why so large a part of the German nation, which regards freedom of investigation as the palladium of its culture, can swallow such second-rate and pestilent stuff as General Friedrich von Bernhardi's pseudo-scientific theories about "Might being the supreme Right" in his book *Germany and the Next War*,[1] and why masses of sentimental, good-hearted, and (according to current German standards) highly instructed people have felt themselves more formidable and furious through falling under the spell-binding phrases of the war party. As, for example, the following: "We must *now* decide whether we wish to develop into, and to maintain, a World Empire . . . With us it is a question 'To be or not to be' . . . France must be so completely crushed that she can never again cross our path . . . The imminent war with England will decide the whole future of our politics and our civilisation. It will decide our place in the world or our downfall. . . . Let Germany's political and military superiority on the Continent of Europe be immovably established (this goal is not yet reached and must be our first objective) and *then* our future lies on the sea . . . The period which destiny has allotted us for concentrating our forces and preparing ourselves for the deadly struggle may soon be passed. We must use it." This fustian is good enough for the Yellow Press. But in Germany it seems to have been able to carry with it the eminent and good-hearted Professors who have beamed at us through their gold spectacles with unaffected goodwill. Even these well-meaning men have not been able to stand up against such doctrines as "the morality of the State must be judged by

[1] English translation published by Arnold, pp. 9, 11, 45, 123. The German work was published in 1911 after the Franco-German Convention about Morocco and the Congo.

the nature and *raison d'être* of the State and not of the individual citizen. The end-all and be-all of a State is POWER. And he who is not man enough to look this truth in the face should not meddle in politics."[1] Or this: "We must not deceive ourselves as to the principles of English policy. We must realise ourselves that it is guided exclusively by unscrupulous selfishness, that it shrinks from no means of accomplishing its aims, and thus shows admirable diplomatic skill." And yet these good Professors have been our frequent guests in England and have had every opportunity of knowing us as we really are and our Government as it really is. But many Germans have two sides to their minds, one tenderly sentimental, the other easily browbeaten by the authority of expert theorisers. The result is that one and the same man can be the kindest and sincerest of personal friends and yet, at a momentous crisis in the affairs of his country and the world, allow himself to be chloroformed by such a theory as that which Bernhardi borrows from Treitschke "Political arrangements" (*e.g.*, treaties guaranteeing the neutrality of Belgium) "have only a qualified value; they are always concluded with a tacit reservation . . . . Conditions may arise which are more powerful than the most honourable intentions. The country's own interests—considered, of course, in the highest ethical sense—must then turn the scale. Frederick the Great was all his life long charged with treachery because no treaty or alliance could ever induce him to renounce the right of free self determination."[2] "It is chiefly due," writes a well-informed and not unfriendly observer,[3] "to the

[1] Bernhardi (quoting Treitschke's *Politik*), p. 45.

[2] Bernhardi, pp. 272–3, quoting Treitschke, *Deutsche Gedanke*, i. 52.

[3] Mr. A. E. Zimmern in a letter on "The Rights of the War," in *The Nation*, September 5th, 1914.

persistent indoctrination, among the most docile, the most long-suffering, and the most over educated[1] people in the world, of this false, wicked, and arrogant theory of human society and government which has obscured for this generation among every section of political thinkers, in Germany, the great and immortal tradition of German idealism and tolerance."

But to get at the roots of the mischief we must probe deeper still. There is another trait in the German character which predisposes it to listen to the promptings of these sinister and treacherous designs. Here again Prince von Bülow, writing for Germans, not for English people, throws a further light upon German character. He has been speaking of "one of the greatest of German virtues, the sense of discipline": and then he suddenly turns (having tactfully begun his sentence with a compliment) to what he calls "our old vice, ENVY." "'*Propter invidiam*,' through envy and jealousy (said Tacitus about our ancestors) the Germans destroyed their liberators, the Cherusci."[2]

III

Envy and disputatiousness are declared by Prince von Bülow to be characteristics of the German disposition. But these defects are in themselves solvents of national unity. How is it, then, that the German people stand out in modern Europe as the most disciplined of nations, and the most obedient to the orders of the State? The answer to this question shall be given by Prince von Bülow, as he speaks out of a long administrative experience and with an

[1] I should myself have written "mis-educated," not "over-educated."

[2] *Imperial Germany*, English translation, pp. 188–9.

authority far higher than that of any foreign observer. "The Prussian State," he says, "is the backbone of our German political life."[1] In the German Empire, Prussia is the leading State. It has not been the cradle of German culture. "German intellect was developed in the West and the South: the Princes of the West were the patrons of German culture: German intellect had already reached its zenith without the help of Prussia. German intellectual life, which the whole world has learned to admire and which even the first Napoleon respected, is the work of the Southern and Western German domains."[2] German culture is not the creation of Prussia. What Prussia did was to teach Germany the power of discipline. Prussia and the Hohenzollerns were the iron task-masters. "This rude and thoroughly prosaic state of soldiers and officials," as Prince von Bülow calls it, "without many words but with deeds that were all the greater, performed a task of enormous importance in the work of German civilisation." Prussia has knit together, with steel bands of discipline and order, the looser, freer growth of the smaller kingdoms and duchies of what is now the united German Empire. Stiff, unbending, severe, "to this day, still in all essentials a State of soldiers and officials," Prussia is (in Prince von Bülow's judgment) "the heart and core of the German Empire, the State without which the German Empire could not exist, whose kings united Germany, with which the future of the Empire stands or falls." Prussia, indeed, has herself had times of faltering will and

[1] *Imperial Germany*, pp. 191–195, 280–286.

[2] Prince von Bülow would doubtless make an exception in the case of Kant, who did his life work at Königsberg and not only inspired the greatest generation of modern Germans with a philosophical conception of duty, but (it may be added) tried to draw their thoughts away from a narrow nationalism to the wider hope of an international brotherhood of peoples.

timid purpose. When in the past her authorities have become weak and disheartened, she has "suffered a more complete breakdown of her State machinery than any other country." But, for good and for evil, Bismarck recalled her to her iron purpose. And it is the shade of Bismarck that we are fighting to-day.

IV

The Prussian tradition is a military tradition. It knows no fear. It feels few scruples. It is a fortress challenging the ideas and methods of modern democracy. It despises democracy as humanitarian: it dreads it as subversive of discipline; it hates it as a rival; it counterworks it by measures of State relief to the poor, generously conceived but imposed upon the people from above. It regards a Parliamentary *régime* on democratic lines as fatal to resolute government and to a consistent policy in foreign affairs. Hegel was its philosopher, and his legal philosophy glorified the Prussian State. Prussia has attached to its service men of great ability, congenial to itself, from other parts of Germany. The Prussian tradition, however much it may owe in its origin to a racial difference, is now a state of mind. It is the Prussian tradition which has stiffened Germany. It has a noble side of disinterested devotion, of unflagging industry (*labor improbus* is a mark of the Prussian public service), of loyalty to the Throne.

Its policy has given Germany forty years of union, a conscious pride in national unity, a great place among the Powers of the world. Men of business have found the effects of its stern discipline to be advantageous to German commerce because of the protection given to their undertakings by its powerful arm. Manufacturers have found that German industry

has profited by the discipline which army training has given to their workpeople. All over Germany, under the shield of Prussia, there has been an outburst of industrial and commercial energy which is one of the wonders of the modern world. During the last ten years I have been more and more impressed on each visit to Germany by the vigour, the foresight, the conquering *élan* of its commercial and industrial life. Most of our manufacturing cities are in external appearance (I am not speaking of inner and hidden things) squalid vulgar places compared with towns like Leipzig, Nürnberg, Mannheim, Elberfeld, and Cöln. There may have been speculative rashness in some of these developments, but this is but a small factor in the colossal change. The secret of what has been done lies in the scientific adjustment of means to public ends; in the entrusting of the direction of local government to trained and carefully chosen men; in the discipline which makes men move forward in masses towards a definite purpose; and in obedience to the State. It is this obedience to the State which Prussia has taught Germany.

But it has overtaught the lesson. And in their hearts the leaders of Prussia have begun to fear some of the consequences of their handiwork. They dread the growth of Social Democracy. They resent the rising power of the industrial and commercial classes. They have tried, often successfully, to draw them, by flattery and distinctions, into the circle of Prussian officialdom. But they felt that the growing strength of commerce and industry was a menace to military privilege. They realised the increasing influence of English ideas of freedom, especially in regard to education. They saw with concern the strong movement of Feminism—more extreme in some of its theories in Germany than elsewhere. They even watched with anxiety the

success of Mr. Norman Angell's propaganda among University students and the commercial classes. The very prosperity of Germany seemed to be bringing with it the weakening of those traditions which are the core of the Prussian doctrine of the structure of the State. Caste-feeling, a great characteristic of Prussia, could not long continue unchallenged when wealth, and the social consideration which wealth secures, were so rapidly passing to a new and non-military class. In the literature of ideas, in art, the young men of the greatest promise looked for stimulus to France, to Russia, and, not least, to England. On all sides, there were signs of a revolt against the older Prussian standpoint. The Prussian officials themselves, and the Prussian garrison towns, were affected by the new movement. Thus the way was prepared for an attempt at reaction, and there were those who hinted that it might be safer if Germany had a sharp reminder that its union had been won by war and could be corrupted by a long-continued peace. The military caste regarded the Franco-German Convention of 1911 as a slight upon its honour. The tension grew; many minds and that not only among the younger generation, responded to the glowing words of men who declared that Germany should grasp at World Power: the more cautious advisers were brushed aside; heady talk about "World Power or Downfall" excited a rash spirit of speculative adventure. Behind all was the feeling of pride and confidence in the stupendous army, mixed up with a rather vulgar, parvenu desire for self-assertion. And then, suddenly, last July, the mass of pent-up emotion broke through its barriers and swept the Government and the German nation into war. The military power became supreme. And already, as Sir Edward Grey wrote on Sept. 4, "the progress of the war has revealed what a terrible

and immoral thing German militarism is. It is against German militarism that we must fight. The whole of Western Europe would fall under it if Germany were successful in this war . . . It is not the German people but Prussian militarism which has driven Germany and Europe into this war. If that militarism can be overcome, there will be a brighter and a freer day for Europe, which will compensate us for the awful sacrifices that war entails." [1]

V

Prussian militarism, which has carried with it at this juncture (but perhaps only for a time) the great mass of German opinion, has both an evil side and a noble one. It believes that Might is the only guarantee of Right, and that in the struggle for National Power moral scruples are a weakness. It lies with us and our Allies to deal this doctrine a mortal blow. Prussian militarism, on the other hand, has some qualities which exact our admiration. It is brave, stubborn, and loyal to its King. But these virtues are vitiated by its false standards of national honour and by its denial of the right of weaker and smaller States to moral freedom and political independence. And it maintains a principle of government which is the flat opposite of the conviction now beginning to express itself in the more recent developments of the British Empire. The Prussian statesman believes that "members of different nationalities, with different language and customs, and with an intellectual life of a different kind, cannot live side by side in one State without succumbing to the temptation of each trying to force his own nationality on the other." [2] The British

[1] Letter to his constituents at Berwick, published Sept. 5.

[2] Prince B. von Bülow, *Imperial Germany*, page 246.

statesman of the modern type is feeling his way, through practical experience and in deference to claims which he feels to have moral weight, to a very different conclusion—namely, that it *is* possible for members of different nationalities, varying even in language and still more in temperament and in social tradition, to live side by side under one Flag, proud of their common citizenship, eager in its defence, mutually respectful each of the other's convictions, and working out by discussion and experiment a fuller and freer conception of national or Imperial well-being.

It may be that, centuries hence, the historian will regard this war as having been the decisive struggle between these two ideals of citizenship. We are assured that, sooner or later, our British ideal will win. It has behind it the convictions of a world-wide Empire. It commands the prevailing sympathies of modern civilisation. It has with it the Future. But let us set ourselves to learn from the nation which is now our enemy the lessons of systematic organisation and of the thoughtful application of science. In these things, modern Germany has been the teacher of the world. And the Future will need them, even more than they have been needed in the past.

LEEDS, *September* 6, 1914.

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Vol. III (published 1898) price 3*s.* 3*d.*: Vol. IX (published 1902) price 2*s.* 7*d.*

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